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ABSTRACT

Although the needs of American Indian college students in writing classes are very similar to those of Anglo basic writers, Indian writers often bring cultural and linguistic differences into the writing classroom. Indians are oriented only in the present, which affects their use of verb constructions; they are oriented toward sharing, which affects their use of possessive forms; they have a cultural respect for age and authority, which makes their classroom manner appear shy or inattentive; their relationship with nature is harmonious, which precludes careful arrangement of thoughts and the concepts of compare and contrast and cause and effect; and their world is cooperative rather than competitive, necessitating group classroom activities. Those teaching writing to Indian students need to be tolerant of language and grammar errors and to allow students to explore the language. They must teach students that "getting off the subject" is an essential part of the writing process. They should avoid assignments that reflect white, middle class values. Students should have opportunities to explore different audiences, with letter and journal writing and literary response assignments. Above all, the course should be taught holistically. Breaking grammar, sentence structure, paragraph and essay writing into modules runs contrary to Indians' holistic approach to life. (HTH)

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STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING COMPOSITION TO NATIVE AMERICANS

During the past ten years there has been an increased concern for the Basic Writer--the remedial writer, the unskilled writer, the culturally disadvantaged writer...the "bonehead"--there are a lot of labels thrown around. It doesn't really matter what we call them: like John Wayne said when he was barricaded with the cavalry behind the walls of Ft. Apache, "They're out there and we've got 'a stop 'em."

While American Indian writing students bring a unique set of experiences to the classroom, and therefore face unique obstacles, their needs are similar to those of Anglo Basic Writers. In general, everything that's being discovered now about composition (I'm thinking specifically of the research by Mina Shaughnessy and Richard Graves, and of the case studies done by Janet Emig and more recently Sondra Perl) is applicable to the American Indian. That is, heuristics should be motivational, should help develop writing fluency, should generate topics that are accessible, and should, in some way, conform to the stages of prewriting, writing, and revising. The approach should also allow each writer what might be called <u>lateral movement</u> (the freedom to approach a task individually) as well as demand of him/her what educators like to call "behavioral objectives."

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Basic Writers, particularly the Amerind students, simply do not write enough. We can't make, in T.S. Eliot's words, "a raid on the inarticulate" unless we can first pump up our students' essays so that there is enough to raid.

I remember once in class we were talking about possible writing topics. One Navajo woman began telling us a story about how, when she'd been sick for several weeks--dizziness, nausea, weakness, she went to the medicine man. He looked at her eyes, and passed his hand over her. "You'll be alright soon," he said putting his medicine pouch away, "You're pregnant." A simple solution, no explanations necessary. And I thought, if only it were that easy for teachers; if only we could make our basic writers pregnant--with ideas--make them fat with fluency; if we could take our textbooks and pass them around with some special incantation, tell them in five months it'll be over, you'll be alright.... But ours is a different medicine. We have to rely on a combination of models--grammatical, organizational, developmental.

As instructors dealing with American Indian students, we should consider these questions:

1. What motivates the Native American to write?
2. Can we describe the writing process of the Native American? and what are its implications?
3. How does Indian culture account for differences in rhetorical elements?

and 4. What specific problems or interferences occur (ie., linguistic, cognitive, and cultural)?

Also, just to qualify everything I say, when I speak of the Indian, I'm speaking of a person who is bi-cultural and bi-lingual, and the degree of differences between the Anglo Basic

Writer and the Indian Basic Writer depends largely upon the degree of acculturation. For example, most of the students I teach grew up on one of the Reservations in the Southwest and there's a marked difference between the way they think with the way an Indian who grew up off the reservation and who attended public (not BIA) schools, thinks.

Concerning the relationship between language, thought, and culture, theorists (Sapir, Vygotsky, Havighurst) like to talk about man being at the mercy of language. That seems even more appropriate a claim for the person who is bi-cultural. As teachers of diverse groups, we're not simply dealing with their unfamiliarity with standard conventions. Rather, the communication problems which the Amerind student displays are symptomatic of a larger problem--that of cultural dislocation. The instructor must recognize the differing structural and functional language habits. Furthermore, because the relationship between language, culture, and thought is a symbiotic one, it is important to consider the cultural backgrounds of those we are teaching in order to better understand <u>how</u> to teach.

What I'd like to do, then, in <u>very general</u> terms, is to contrast some important differences between the Anglo and the Indian, and to suggest implications these have upon writing.

<u>THE WHITE WAY</u>	<u>THE INDIAN WAY</u>
1. Future Orientated and Time Conscious: Never satisfied with the present; governed by the clock and calendar; organized around tight schedules, they rush around.	Present Orientated: Many tribes have no word for "time"; primary interest is in survival today, not tomorrow.

IMPLICATIONS: Think of the effect this has upon verb constructions. Instead of saying, "Yesterday I walked to the store," a Navajo or Hopi would replace themselves in time and say, in effect, "Yesterday: I walk to store," or "Tomorrow: I listen to birds sing." Notice too, the absence of articles and participial "ing" endings. To further complicate these verb-ending problems, the Navajo and Hopi do not have in their language "t" consonant endings.

Also, another concern we face as instructors, is that of continuity. Because the Indian is not governed by the respect for punctuality as the Anglo is, the tendency to walk into class late or to miss class altogether presents a problem. While this may seem a bit sterotypical--what Anglos like to call "the Indian's sense of time"--of the 22 Indian students in my first semester class, 17 missed more than five days, and 6 were either continually or intermittently late. (One must develop an admirable sense of patience!)

2. Saving and Collecting:	Giving and Sharing:
Save today so we can enjoy tomorrow; school is a system of long-term investment because it will increase earnings in the future; the important people are those who own banks and corporations.	What's important to the Indian is free (the environment, family); a respected person is one who gives, not saves.

IMPLICATIONS: The Anglo sense of individaul ownership is countered by the Indian's collective ownership (tribal ownership). The Indian, interestingly, has no possessive form that can be attached to nouns. We can expect, then, to run across sentences like, "My mother's horse has no tail" translated into "The horse of my mother with no tail."

3. Emphasis On Youth:	Respect For Age:
The concern with how to look young, feel young, act young; when parents become a burden they are sent to rest-homes.	Traditionally, the Indian elders have been revered for their wisdom; they are <u>the</u> role models.
Also, Anglo children are told that to be effective, "look straight into the eyes of the person you're speaking to."	Navajo, Hopi, and Apache children do not question their parents or their superiors (teachers).
	Also, they often appear shy because they are taught not to gaze at an authority during conversation, it is disrespectful.

IMPLICATIONS: This has a tremendous effect on what goes on in the classroom. Reticence, quietness, the lack of student-to-teacher and student-to-student interaction are directly related to the Indian's way of dealing with authority and of being "respectful." For the Indian to speak loudly is disrespectul and rude. We should remember that the student's quietness if not indicative of inattentiveness, nor is it necessarily indicative of any comprehension problem.

4. Conquest of Nature:	Harmony with Nature:
Anglos aim to control their environment--with dams, atomic energy, additives, and bridges; in an attempt to re-order the environment, they often promote chaos and confusion.	The Indian respects simplicity; doesn't feel the need to exercise, as the Anglo does, their neuroses and then organize it; their world is not chaotic; their spatial world, in fact, is more precisely organized and structured, therefore their way of arranging data is different.

IMPLICATIONS: It's hard to get the Amerind student to understand the importance of arrangement as the Anglos see it. The natural-cultural cognitive processes (eg., cause and effect, comparison-contrast, Aristotelian logic) appear untruthful and complicated to the Indian's sense of order. For example, if it does not rain enought, the crops spoil (cause and effect)--

not because there's a high front moving in from the West, but because the earth needs to be dried out, or simply because it is so, or becasue they have not lived in harmony.

Comparison is not natural either, because it implies making judgements and often choosing sides. On the other hand, description and particularly narration are, perhaps, more natural to the Indian, whose culture has been passed down through stories, orally, than it is for their Anglo counterparts.

5. Competetive:	Cooperative:
In their world, most progress is explained as a result of competition--getting ahead of one another.	Indians, however, place value on working together, sharing and failing together; not one person to blame.

For the Anglo, if something goes wrong, it's the person before him who screwed up. Who is it, for example, we blame because our Basic Writers fail in Freshman English?

IMPLICATIONS: This cultural difference has a direct influence on how we should organize classroom activities. Pitting one student's essay against another may prove disasterous. On the other hand, small groups and pairs in writing and in criticism tend to work well.

Robert Havighurst claims that, "although the Indian students have innately the same ability [as their Anglo counterparts], they have different motivation since they are not competetive, but cooperative; their culture does not prepare them for traditional academic work. As a result, they achieve less and less as they grow older." Care then, should be taken to insure success.

A student who comes from a culture which is cooperative

rather than competetive, which discourages dissent, and which reinforces reticence, cannot quickly adapt to a competetive, ARGUMENTATIVE, and highly verbal world without running the risk of failure. The Amerind student comes from a culture in which controversy and argument are not socially acceptable behaviors. What we need to do is explain that healthy disagreement is not hostility, and that acknowledging a mistake is not failure, but process. We must expect that the mode of discourse in which they will have the toughest time, then, is...ARGUMENT.

One of the questions I posed in the opening of this paper concerned the actual writing process. Through observation of in-class writing and through conferencing my students, it appears that the cultural and linguistic interferences affect their writing in the following ways: Students are overly concerned with mechanical correctness. While they have not mastered the surface problems, they are aware of them. This awareness impedes fluency. Their tendency to erase instead of crossing out and continuing also interferes with their ability to develop and maintain a string of thoughts. (I've never seen a group of students so preoccupied with the vigorous rubbing of paper into the table.) They are apprehensive and fear failure. Typically, their self concepts are poor; they believe they are "bad" writers. They pause continually, usually searching for one word or wondering if that last comma was correct. In general, as Emig has noted about the Basic Writer, editing occurs prematurely, and the content of their editing is topological--that is, they are concerned with the superficial

correctness and correctness of expression, not with design or thought. I think in some cases, their editing becomes, as Sondra Perl puts it, "a strategy for avoiding writing." Another interference that occurs, exhibited also in their pauses, is the necessity for some students to translate what they think in Navajo into English, then processing that translation into writing so, in a sense, there are two processes taking place simultaneously.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. While recognizing the value of grammar and usage as an appropriate instrument of learning, also consider this: "that language is made by the needs of men, and grammar is made by professors." Have tolerance for the kinds of errors you despise.

2. Do what you can to insure the initial success of your students. Let them explore writing à la Peter Elbow and Ken Macrorie. It's important to allow the Indian writer ample time to explore the language and the topic. They need to understand that writing is a process of discovery and that erratic thoughts and "getting off the subject" is an essential part of the process.

3. Assignments should be designed that avoid cultural and experiential interference or bias. The resource potential of the Amerind student as an interpreter of Indian life and thought should not be overlooked (this includes the use,too, of literal translation from text and stories in the original language). Begin encouraging students to recognize each has a unique experience (the use of autobiography, narrative, descriptive writing, cultural emphasis).

Asking a Navajo to write about the controversial issues that are typical of the middle-class value system (ie., "The Smoking Debate," "Abortion," "Euthenasia," "Television Violence") is like asking an Anglo student who doesn't drive to write a narrative about driving while under the influence of peyote. Instead, topics concerned with Ecology, Initiation, Cultural Values are more appropriate. It would be possible, for instance, to compare the treatment of women in a tribal community with that in Anglo society. This allows the Indian writer to exercise what he/she knows and to explore cultural differences at the same time.

4. Because their writing has been exclusively for a critical audience of one, the teacher, and becasue they have been brought up to respect the opinions of their elders, they have had little or no experience writing for a variety of rhetorical situations. Therefore they have only a meagre concept of speaker-to-audience. They tend to be, when writing in an argumentative mode, apologetic and neutral; they don't want to take a stand. So we need to supply them with a variety of discourse opportunities including journal writing, letters, response to literature, use of persona....

5. We should establish heuristics that will engage the four communication modes of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. (Particularly the in-class reading and discussion of contemporary Indian writers such as Simon Ortiz, James Welch, Vine Deloria helps motivate the students and generates discussion.)

In conclusion, we should approach the course with a holistic aim. That is, don't separate the teaching of grammar, sentence structure, paragraph, and essay writing into modules. While

Anglos tend to be analytical and scientific, and enjoy breaking things down into component parts, the Indian approaches life holistically. Breaking things down is not a natural cognitive function. When they build, they build one at a time. When they make jewelry, they create one bracelet or necklace at a time. Asking them to excel in the comma, then the compound sentence, then the paragraph and so on is like asking them to cut a thousand pieces of turquoise, then polish all thousand, then hammer a couple dozen bracelets...turning their artistic process into a production line.

Our job is to teach writing/thinking skills. In the process, we should show respect for the Indian culture, the Indian way of life. We don't want to erase that.

Let me leave you with an image. Until recently, within the past 15 or 20 years, Indian children were tattooed for government classification purposes. I noticed in my class that a few students had these blurred numbers or crosses on their wrists. Others had scars because they had burned the identification off. They didn't want to be classified and labelled. If we don't recognize and appreciate the unique differences the Indian student brings to the Anglo culture, the effect of our teaching will do no more than what those attempts to identify them have done.